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Exploring local service delivery challenges: A case of Matjhabeng Local Municipality, Free State Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the delivery of basic services to communities within South African municipalities, which is an ongoing challenge. Despite significant progress by the government, unemployment, crime, and inequality persist, and providing basic services remains a key concern. This paper further examined the difficulties Matjhabeng Local Municipality face in fulfilling its constitutional mandate to ensure that communities receive basic services in accordance with Section 152(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. The study identified the main obstacles to delivering effective services within Matjhabeng Local Municipality and suggested strategies and approaches to fully overcome them. This work is grounded in two theories: New Public Management (NPM) and Public Administration. Public administration involves the procedures and actions of the current government in providing essential services. NPM has contributed to the global debate on how governments can improve performance management and development. The research is qualitative, focusing on exploring variables, their interactions, and interpretations within a specific context. It aids researchers in generating descriptive data and insights. This study offers theoretical frameworks and practical guidance for addressing service delivery challenges at the local level. It also contributes to the dissemination of knowledge in public management and the understanding of government organisations responsible for capacity building in local government.

Keywords: Service Delivery, South Africa, Efficient, Effective, Integrated Development Planning, Development.

INTRODUCTION

Local development in communities has been a primary concern in South Africa since the first democratically elected government, 32 years ago. The government committed to enhancing citizens' quality of life by delivering effective, efficient, and high-quality services. The national, provincial, and local governments constitute the three levels of governance in the Republic of South Africa.[1] The 257 municipalities that comprise the local government sector are responsible for providing essential services

[1] S. Booysen, "Conclusion," in *Local Elections in South Africa: Parties, People and Politics.* , ed. S Booysen (Bloemfontein: Sun Press, 2012), 351–59.

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such as water, sanitation, recreational parks and gardens, cemeteries, community halls, libraries, paved roads, electricity, and numerous other amenities that elevate the lives and dignity of residents.[2]

There are 205 Category B Local Municipalities, 44 Category C District Municipalities, and eight Category A Metropolitan Municipalities in South Africa.[3] Municipalities should be accountable to the voters and are required to provide services fairly.[4] The promotion of social and economic development must be adequately addressed by local government authorities.[5] Shongwe states that it is the responsibility of government organisations, including municipalities, to deliver effective services that enhance the welfare of community members under their jurisdiction.[6] However, South Africa has many disparities rooted in its colonial past and an unjust history, which have led to a range of socioeconomic issues that need to be addressed to bring about change across various levels of government.

The genuine needs of citizens are often ignored in the complex process of implementing government change. According to service delivery reports, local authorities across the country face numerous challenges. The quality of services and the pace of improvement often do not meet the expectations of many citizens.

Although the South African government has achieved significant progress, unemployment, crime, and inequality still exist, and providing basic services remains a major concern. According to Chen et al., service delivery refers to supplying resources such as roads, electricity, and water for people.[7] "Local government is considered the main area of development and delivery and is very important for all new South African transformation projects," according to SALGA.[8] Additionally, the Republic of South Africa's Constitution, Act 108, Section 152(1) 1996, mandates local authorities to ensure the provision of these services to local communities, promote a safe and healthy environment, and encourage public organisations and public participation in local government affairs.

The current government prioritised local governments to promote decentralisation and resolve service delivery problems. Municipalities provide services to meet residents' basic needs.[9] Although South Africa has one of the most advanced local government systems according to its constitution, some areas still receive inadequate services. The South African community's poor service delivery has attracted significant attention lately.[10]

The paper will explore the challenges that Matjhabeng Local Municipality faces in meeting its constitutional obligation to provide basic services to communities, as outlined in Section 152(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. Matjhabeng falls under category B. Matjhabeng Local Municipality was established on 5 December 2000 following the merger of six (6) Transitional Local Councils into a single municipality. It is an economically sustainable and financially successful municipality (IDP 2024/2025). With a population of almost 500,000, Matjhabeng Municipality includes the city of Welkom and the towns of Odendaalsrus, Virginia, Hennenman, Allanridge, and Ventersburg.

This study aims to identify the main obstacles to providing communities within the Matjhabeng Local Municipality with effective services and to propose methods and approaches to overcome them fully. Since the establishment of municipalities across the country in 2000, this research is among several studies that examine service delivery at the local municipal level. It stands out because it identifies and analyses obstacles that hinder local government officials from delivering essential services. This makes the study unique, as it enhances the theoretical understanding of service delivery. The study aims to

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[2] Bonginkosi Ronald Shongwe and D F Meyer, "Service Delivery Challenges within Rural Communities: The Case of the Nkomazi Local Municipal Area," *Administratio Publica* 31, no. 2 (2023): 136–59.

[3] F. K. L. Kgobe, "Africanised Public Administration Sold out Public Service Delivery: A Case of South Africa," in *International Conference on Public Administration and Development Alternative*, 2020, 54–61.

[4] Shongwe and Meyer, "Service Delivery Challenges within Rural Communities: The Case of the Nkomazi Local Municipal Area"; M.M. Masuku, "Effective Governance in South Africa: Reality or Myth?," *African Journal of Democracy and Governance* 6, no. 3 (2019): 1–19.

[5] Shongwe and Meyer, "Service Delivery Challenges within Rural Communities: The Case of the Nkomazi Local Municipal Area."

[6] Shongwe and Meyer, "Service Delivery Challenges within Rural Communities: The Case of the Nkomazi Local Municipal Area."

[7] R. Chen, Chaomei Chen, and Zhigang Hu, "Citation Space Analysis Principles and Applications: CiteSpace Practical Guide," *Beijing: Science Press*, 2014, 24.

[8] SALGA, "Municipal Wheeling Guideline for Allowing Third-Party Access to Municipal Electrical Network ," 2023.

[9] SALGA, "Municipal Wheeling Guideline for Allowing Third-Party Access to Municipal Electrical Network ."

[10] K. F. Wallis, *Time Series Analysis and Macroeconometric Modelling: The Collected Papers of Kenneth F. Wallis*, Economists of the Twentieth Century (E. Elgar, 1995).

foster a greater sense of accountability and ownership of the mandate among the government and basic service recipients by clarifying the relationship between service delivery and the nation's laws and policies. This research is significant because it provides both theories and practical guidance on addressing obstacles to service delivery in local communities. It makes a valuable contribution to the dissemination of theoretical knowledge in public management and about government organisations responsible for capacity building at the local government level.

After the coalition government was formed in 1994, the ruling party made additional pledges regarding the provision of services such as housing, electricity, water, and sanitation. Since 1994, delivering services has been a key element of South Africa's democratic ambitions.

The outcome of the results of the May 2024 national and local elections, show that it remains important, more as a source of popular frustration than as a promise. However, little has changed. Many small towns in South Africa struggle to run and maintain their infrastructure sustainably and economically. According to the Matjhabeng Local Municipality IDP 2024/2025, addressing backlogs in water, sanitation, roads, and power, among other services, presents a significant challenge. Residents become frustrated and resort to protests.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Constitution of 1996, the White Paper on Local Government 1998, and the Municipal Finance Act 2003 establish a democratic, service-oriented local government. However, despite these legal frameworks, South African municipalities still face a service delivery crisis that hampers the government's ability to meet its responsibilities.[11]

The Municipal Structures Act establishes municipalities by type and category. It also defines the division of powers and functions among different categories of municipalities (*Municipal Structures Act 1998*). It regulates internal structures, systems, office bearers, and electoral systems. Local government is constitutionally recognised as a distinct sphere of government, essential for fostering democracy, given its history of laws and policies that have caused significant inequalities in municipal service delivery. Under the Act, municipalities are tasked with addressing past inequalities by collaborating with communities to develop effective and sustainable municipal services that support socioeconomic development within a safe and healthy environment (*Municipal Structures Act 1998, preamble*). The national, provincial, and local governments are the three levels of government in the Republic of South Africa.[12] Local government in South Africa consists of 257 municipalities that are responsible for delivering essential services such as water, sanitation, electricity, paved roads, libraries, community halls, parks and gardens, and cemeteries, all of which contribute to the well-being and dignity of communities.[13] These municipalities are structured into three categories, namely 8 Category A metropolitan municipalities, 205 Category B local municipalities, and 44 Category C district municipalities.[14] Municipalities should be accountable to the people[15] and must deliver services impartially and equitably.[16] Promoting social and economic development is a key responsibility of local government authorities.[17] Shongwe et al. emphasises that it is the duty of governmental organizations, including municipalities, to provide effective service delivery that enhances community welfare within their jurisdictions.[18]

[11] Percyval Siyabonga Chili et al., "Assessing Service Delivery Challenges in a South African Municipality," *Journal of Public Administration, Finance and Law* 28, no. 2023 (2023): 36–47.
[12] Booysen, "Conclusion."
[13] Shongwe and Meyer, "Service Delivery Challenges within Rural Communities: The Case of the Nkomazi Local Municipal Area."
[14] Kgobe, "Africanised Public Administration Sold out Public Service Delivery: A Case of South Africa."
[15] Masuku, "Effective Governance in South Africa: Reality or Myth?"
[16] Shongwe and Meyer, "Service Delivery Challenges within Rural Communities: The Case of the Nkomazi Local Municipal Area."
[17] Lourens Johannes Erasmus Beyers, "Service Delivery Challenges Facing Municipalities: A Case Study of Fetakgomo Local Municipality in Sekhukhune District Municipality, Limpopo Province.," *Bangladesh E-Journal of Sociology* 13, no. 2 (2016): 167.
[18] Shongwe and Meyer, "Service Delivery Challenges within Rural Communities: The Case of the Nkomazi Local Municipal Area."

Local governments need to promote and strengthen community involvement.[19] Every planning and decision-making process within the municipality should include community members.[20] Effective service delivery will benefit from this. In addition to being encouraged to pay for services, community members must be free to participate in all municipal systems. The local municipality would be recognised and appreciated for their efforts.[21] Madzhivandila and Asha claim that the Integrated Development Plan (IDP), as a mechanism that promotes public participation, where community members formally voice their requests during public meetings, plays a significant role in improving service delivery.[22] When developing the IDP, community involvement is essential.[23] Successful consultation, creation, and implementation of the IDP will support the provision of a range of community services.[24]

Local municipalities are the form of local government most closely aligned with the needs and wants of the populace according to Naidoo and Ramphal.[25] Shongwe and Meyer have stated that, subject to national and provincial laws, a municipality has the authority to manage local government activities independently.[26] To deliver essential services to individuals across various localities, municipalities must take a leading role.[27] Because they have direct access to the daily concerns of the local community, the municipality is the relevant institution within the government domain that interacts directly with communities.[28] Nonetheless, most local governments in the Republic of South Africa are regarded as compromised and unable to enhance the quality of service delivery.[29]

Local government is responsible for managing public services and is one of the three branches of government, alongside the national and provincial governments. A local government operates independently and has the authority to handle issues related to local affairs. Bylaws can be created and enforced by municipalities.[30] The roles and responsibilities of local government, especially municipalities, differ considerably from those at the national and provincial levels. However, ensuring that services are delivered to the public without discrimination remains a shared objective among the three branches of government.[31] Mbandlwa asserts that to enhance the dignity of impoverished and formerly marginalised groups affected by apartheid, local government should focus on providing high-quality basic services to the community.[32] Many towns across the nation are performing poorly. Concerns facing local governments, such as their inability to create an efficient budget to address problems in community service delivery, hamper the provision of fundamental services to communities. Municipalities that fail to establish proper budgets will struggle to maintain financial stability and operate efficiently, rendering them ineffective and incompetent.[33]

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[19] Onkgopotse Senatla Madumo, "Fostering Effective Service Delivery through Public Participation," *Administratio Publica* 22, no. 3 (2014): 130–47.

[20] Modimowabarwa Kanyane, "Exploring Challenges of Municipal Service Delivery in South Africa (1994-2013)," *Africa's Public Service Delivery & Performance Review* 2, no. 1 (2014): 90–110.

[21] Masuku, "Effective Governance in South Africa: Reality or Myth?"

[22] T. S. Madzivhandila and A A Asha, "Integrated Development Planning Process and Service Delivery Challenges for South Africa's Local Municipalities," *Journal of Public Administration* 47, no. si-1 (2012): 369–78.

[23] Republic of South Africa, *Local Government: Municipal Systems Act, Act 32 of 2000* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 2000).

[24] Kalie Barnes, Susette Brynard, and Corene de Wet, "The Influence of School Culture and School Climate on Violence in Schools of the Eastern Cape Province," *South African Journal of Education* 32, no. 1 (January 27, 2012): 69–82, https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v32n1a495.

[25] Calvin Naidoo and R R Ramphal, "The Factors That Affect Public Participation for Effective Municipal Service Delivery: A Case of Ward Committees," *South African Journal of Industrial Engineering* 29, no. 4 (2018): 82–93.

[26] Shongwe and Meyer, "Service Delivery Challenges within Rural Communities: The Case of the Nkomazi Local Municipal Area."

[27] Masuku, "Effective Governance in South Africa: Reality or Myth?"

[28] Chris Kanyane, *Turfloop a Conscious Pariah: How University of the North Brought in the Age of Barack Obama Beyond Our Wildest Dreams* (Trafford Publishing, 2010).

[29] Republic of South Africa, *The State of Local Government in South Africa. (Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs). Report* (Pretoria: Government Printer., 2009).

[30] S. M. Madue, "In the Name of Ignorance: Trampling on the Powers of Institutions Supporting Constitutional Democracy in South Africa," *Journal of Public Administration and Development Alternatives (JPADA)* 1, no. 2 (2016): 1–14.

[31] Kanyane, *Turfloop a Conscious Pariah: How University of the North Brought in the Age of Barack Obama Beyond Our Wildest Dreams*.

[32] Zamokuhle Mbandlwa, "Women's Day, Women's Month for Who? For South African Women or South African Government and Politicians?," *Journal of Pharmaceutical Negative Results*, 2022.

[33] Shongwe and Meyer, "Service Delivery Challenges within Rural Communities: The Case of the Nkomazi Local Municipal Area."

According to Shongwe, service delivery involves the provision of essential, high-quality commodities and services, which include tangible public goods and intangible services.[34] Sefala highlights that establishing plans and strategies to be implemented by a government entity, such as a municipality, is crucial for the effective delivery of vital services.[35] When public officials are motivated by ethical leadership and accountability, service delivery can be managed more effectively.[36] Shongwe further notes that many South Africans have lost confidence in the government's capacity to govern efficiently, especially at the local government level.[37] The challenges of service delivery across South Africa have become increasingly severe, exemplified by the rise of service delivery protests in various areas of the country year after year, as observed by Shongwe and Meyer.[38]

According to Shongwe and Meyer, municipalities have to ensure the successful and efficient provision of essential services to communities, including water, electricity, housing, and adequate sanitation.[39] Basic services are distributed unevenly across rural and urban areas, with urban areas receiving more than rural ones. The capacity of municipalities, which is essential for delivering local government services, has been acknowledged by academics. Throughout the country, many municipalities cannot provide communities with vital services. Most rural towns still face backlogs in basic service delivery, reflecting the current state of local government in rural areas.

The white paper on local government outlines a framework for transforming the local government system to enhance citizens' lives by engaging with them. It recognises the vital role local government plays in rebuilding communities to establish a democratic, integrated, non-racial society. The Constitution mandates that local government to:

- provide democracy and ensure accountability within local communities;
- deliver essential services in a manner that is sustainable over time;
- contribute to both social progress and economic growth; and
- maintain conditions that support a safe and healthy environment, while encouraging meaningful participation of communities and community organisations in local governance processes.[40]

The mandate for municipalities outlined in the White Paper on Local Government of 1998 requires them to effectively address issues related to service delivery, including infrastructure development, the housing backlog, and other services citizens need.[41] Sadly, the majority of municipalities find it difficult to provide sufficient services that guarantee a certain level of efficacy and efficiency. To conduct effective monitoring, municipalities need assistance, which adds to growing concerns about the shortage of services in local communities. According to Mabizela et al., inadequate administration of monitoring and evaluation systems leads to a lack of accountability.[42]

Urban and rural municipalities could deliver essential services to residents more effectively. Widespread protests and demonstrations over service delivery in rural and township municipalities highlight this issue, as residents have lost confidence in local governments due to their failure to ensure the provision of basic services.[43] According to Mabizela and Matsiliza, various problems, including

[34] Shongwe and Meyer, "Service Delivery Challenges within Rural Communities: The Case of the Nkomazi Local Municipal Area."
[35] M. J. Sefala, "Nature and Purpose of Developmental Local Government: Case of the Limpopo Province," *Journal of Public Administration* 44, no. 4 (2009): 1158–72.
[36] Mbandlwa, "Women's Day, Women's Month for Who? For South African Women or South African Government and Politicians?"
[37] Shongwe and Meyer, "Service Delivery Challenges within Rural Communities: The Case of the Nkomazi Local Municipal Area."
[38] Shongwe and Meyer, "Service Delivery Challenges within Rural Communities: The Case of the Nkomazi Local Municipal Area."
[39] Shongwe and Meyer, "Service Delivery Challenges within Rural Communities: The Case of the Nkomazi Local Municipal Area."
[40] Republic of South Africa, "White Paper on Local Government," *Department of Constitutional Development* (Government Publishers Pretoria, 1998).
[41] Africa, "White Paper on Local Government."
[42] Hlengiwe Mabizela and Noluthando S Matsiliza, "Uncovering the Gaps in the Provision of Services in the Rural Okhahlamba Municipality of KwaZulu-Natal Province," *Africa's Public Service Delivery & Performance Review* 8, no. 1 (2020): 9; Shongwe and Meyer, "Service Delivery Challenges within Rural Communities: The Case of the Nkomazi Local Municipal Area."
[43] Andrew Siddle and Thomas Koelble, "Local Government in South Africa: Can the Objectives of the Developmental State Be Achieved through the Current Model of Decentralised Governance?" (eSocialSciences, 2017).

corruption, insufficient capacity within municipalities, ineffective oversight, and inadequate funding from federal and provincial governments, contribute to these service delivery challenges.[44]

Research by Mabizela and Matsiliza examined the difficulties communities in the Okhahlamba Municipality, KwaZulu-Natal, face in accessing services. They found a delay in service delivery because the Okhahlamba Local Municipality is not providing essential services to the communities it oversees.[45] It was identified that the municipality's limited capacity and human resource limitations were the main causes of the service delivery issues. Additionally, residents of Maswazini, one of the surveyed localities, reported receiving very little assistance. They stated that their sanitation services were poor and that they lacked access to potable running water. The results also indicate that residents lack adequate housing.

According to COGTA, municipalities face several challenges that hinder service delivery, including a lack of technical expertise, knowledge, leadership, and managerial skills.[46] To effectively fulfil their duties in providing services to communities, public administrators and ward councillors must develop the necessary skills and expertise.[47] Ward councillors and municipal officials maintain close relationships with the community, engaging with residents to foster continuous improvement. To enhance the lives of community members, local government officials need to devise strategies for securing financial and human resources.[48]

Mngomezulu examined the extent of political influence within the local administration of South Africa's uMlalazi Local Municipality in KwaZulu-Natal.[49] The country has seen a rise in service delivery protests in recent years due to increasing dissatisfaction with the lack of essential and effective service delivery. In many municipalities, corruption has become widespread and institutionalised. Political interference in municipal administration remains a challenge for South African municipalities, leading to conflicts and disputes between politicians and municipal officials. According to Mashamaite, many municipalities across the country seem to neglect the principle of separation of powers between politicians and local government.[50] Mngomezulu argues that political interference in most towns results in disputes over local governance. Such conflicts are common in municipal projects and tenders, where politicians frequently pursue their own interests.[51]

Politicians attempt to pressure municipalities to hire their cadres, even when those cadres lack the necessary training, thereby overlooking qualified candidates. Munzhedzi argues that political interference significantly affects service delivery, as the employment of unqualified individuals hampers the municipality's ability to function effectively and results in poor service.[52] Mngomezulu further states that political interference affects service delivery, as appointing an incompetent person may prevent them from fulfilling their responsibilities efficiently, and selecting unsuitable officials can also harm service outcomes.[53] The ANC's cadre deployment policy promotes the idea that individuals should work for the government because they are dedicated members of the organisation's cadres, which influences the quality of service provision. Alarmingly, ANC members are often granted municipal development projects during IDP procedures in uMlalazi Local Municipality, even though some are not subjected to

[44] Mabizela and Matsiliza, "Uncovering the Gaps in the Provision of Services in the Rural Okhahlamba Municipality of KwaZulu-Natal Province."
[45] Mabizela and Matsiliza, "Uncovering the Gaps in the Provision of Services in the Rural Okhahlamba Municipality of KwaZulu-Natal Province."
[46] Mabizela and Matsiliza, "Uncovering the Gaps in the Provision of Services in the Rural Okhahlamba Municipality of KwaZulu-Natal Province."
[47] IDASA, " Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA). The State of Local Government and Service Delivery in South Africa: Issues, Challenges and Solutions," 2010.
[48] Mabizela and Matsiliza, "Uncovering the Gaps in the Provision of Services in the Rural Okhahlamba Municipality of KwaZulu-Natal Province."
[49] Sengiwakhile Mngomezulu, "Political Interference in the Administration of Service Delivery in Umlalazi Local Municipality of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa," *Journal of Economics and Behavioral Studies* 12, no. 1 (2020): 38–45.
[50] Kgalema Mashamaite, "Public Service Delivery Protests in a Democratic South Africa: A Dilemma for Local Municipalities," *Mediterranean Journal Os Social Sciences* 5 (2014).
[51] Mngomezulu, "Political Interference in the Administration of Service Delivery in Umlalazi Local Municipality of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa."
[52] Pandelani Harry Munzhedzi, "Evaluating the Efficacy of Municipal Policy Implementation in South Africa: Challenges and Prospects," *African Journal of Governance and Development* 9, no. 1 (2020): 89–105.
[53] Mngomezulu, "Political Interference in the Administration of Service Delivery in Umlalazi Local Municipality of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa."

financial verification or assessment to determine whether they are truly capable of executing them. Some municipalities, such as uMlalazi, also fail to comply with the MFMA and other national financial laws.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is based on two theories: New Public Management (NPM) and Public Administration. Public administration refers to the procedures and actions the current government employs to deliver essential services. The government's fundamental, high-quality services aim to improve the lives of community members. Furthermore, all government operations, organizations, and laws are encompassed under public administration.[54] According to Stroh, public administration involves the delivery of vital, high-quality services by the government to the public, guided by the diverse needs and desires of the community.[55]

Public administration in South Africa is expected to operate in line with the democratic values and principles set out in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996). Section 195(1) outlines key principles that should guide public administration, including the promotion and maintenance of high professional ethics, the efficient and responsible use of resources, and a clear focus on development. It further emphasises that services should be delivered fairly and equitably, while also ensuring that the needs of the public are addressed and that citizens are encouraged to participate in policy-making processes. In addition, public administration needs to remain accountable for its actions.[56]

This theory is linked to this theme because it explores public decisions, government procedures, and how public officials deliver services. Since public institutions and administrators are expected to lead social, economic, and political development, this article is relevant.

According to Denhardt and Catlaw, the NPM theory was first developed in the 1970s to promote practical improvements in the operations of public institutions.[57] It sought to address the political and economic challenges governments face worldwide at that time. The NPM approach identified issues in public institutions during the 1970s, such as inadequate implementation of public programmes and projects and inefficient utilisation of organisational resources. According to Maserumule, this strategy advocated restrictions on government expansion, the privatisation of government assets, and the use of contracts rather than direct service delivery.[58]

Maserumule states that NPM is part of modern theoretical and contemporary worldviews.[59] So far, NPM has contributed to the global discussion on how governments can improve performance management and development. According to Mbandlwa, this theory includes numerous theoretical elements and is highly useful for helping governments enhance production and performance management, as well as ensuring suitable and effective financial management and accountability.[60]

South African government enacted various legislative frameworks aimed at improving performance and strengthening accountability within the public sector. In this regard, the present study aligns with the NPM approach. These laws include the Local Government: Municipal Finance Management Act 56 of 2003, the Local Government: Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000, and the Public Finance Management Act 1 of 1999.[61] These frameworks reflect core NPM principles such as decentralisation, a focus on economic and social development, performance management, and outsourcing.[62] Maserumule further indicates that legislation such as the Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 and the Municipal Finance Management Act 56 of 2003 places an obligation on municipalities to

[54] J. Bvuma, "Public Administration: Foundations of Public Administration: Rights and Obligations in Public Administration: Only Study Guide 1 for PUB2601," *University of South Africa: Pretoria*, 2014.
[55] E.C. Stroh, "Public Management Skills: Only Study Guide for PUB3701" (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 2014).
[56] Republic of South Africa, "Constitution of the Republic of South Africa," *Government Gazette* 378, no. 17678 (1996).
[57] Robert B Denhardt and Thomas J Catlaw, *Theories of Public Organization* (Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, Monterey, CA, 1984).
[58] Mashupye Herbet Maserumule, *Good Governance in the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD): A Public Administration Perspective* (University of South Africa (South Africa), 2011).
[59] Maserumule, *Good Governance in the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD): A Public Administration Perspective*.
[60] Mbandlwa, "Women's Day, Women's Month for Who? For South African Women or South African Government and Politicians?"
[61] Maserumule, *Good Governance in the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD): A Public Administration Perspective*.
[62] Noluthando Matsiliza, "Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation: Reviewing an Inclusive Approach in the South Africa's Government Wide Monitoring and Evaluation," *Africa's Public Service Delivery & Performance Review* 1, no. 2 (2012): 67–83.

actively involve communities and other stakeholders in processes such as integrated development planning and budgeting.[63]

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design using a systematic document analysis approach to explore the persistent local service delivery challenges in Matjhabeng Local Municipality, Free State Province, South Africa. The qualitative design was considered appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth understanding of governance processes, institutional dynamics, and contextual factors influencing municipal service delivery through the analysis of documentary evidence. Documents were purposively selected based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure methodological rigour. The inclusion criteria comprised official municipal documents such as Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), Annual Reports, Auditor-General South Africa reports, Municipal Public Accounts Committee (MPAC) reports, National Treasury publications, municipal budgets, performance reports, council resolutions, relevant legislative and policy frameworks, academic journal articles, and government publications published between 2018 and 2025. Documents that were outdated, lacked relevance to the research objectives, were duplicated, or did not specifically address service delivery and governance issues within Matjhabeng Local Municipality were excluded from the analysis.

The document analysis followed a systematic process involving document identification, screening, appraisal for authenticity and credibility, data extraction, coding, categorisation, and interpretation. The study used an inductive thematic analysis. With this method, repeated reading of the selected documents enabled the identification of recurring patterns, concepts, and emerging themes related to infrastructure deterioration, financial management, governance failures, institutional capacity constraints, community protests, accountability mechanisms, and service delivery performance. Themes were developed through iterative coding, comparison of codes across multiple data sources, and the refinement of categories to ensure consistency and analytical depth. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study used credibility through data triangulation across multiple documentary sources, dependability by maintaining a transparent and auditable analytical process, confirmability through systematic coding and evidence-based interpretation, and transferability by providing detailed contextual descriptions of the municipality and its governance environment.

The study also acknowledges certain limitations. As the research relied exclusively on documentary evidence, it was constrained by the availability, completeness, and accuracy of official records and did not capture the lived experiences and perceptions of municipal officials, councillors, or community members. Nevertheless, using multiple authoritative documentary sources and rigorous thematic analysis strengthened the reliability and validity of the findings, ensuring that the study extends beyond a conventional literature review to constitute a robust qualitative investigation into the institutional and governance factors underpinning service delivery challenges in Matjhabeng Local Municipality.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study explores the following aspects requiring discussion.

Matjhabeng Local Municipality (MLM), located in the Lejweleputswa District of the Free State Province, encompasses the city of Welkom and the nearby towns of Thabong, Odendaalsrus, Virginia, and Allanridge. Over the last decade, the municipality has increasingly struggled to fulfil its constitutional mandate to provide sustainable basic services. Ongoing service delivery failures have led to community protests, legal actions, and provincial intervention. These issues are linked to financial difficulties, ageing infrastructure, governance weaknesses, and institutional capacity constraints.[64]

[63] Maserumule, *Good Governance in the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD): A Public Administration Perspective*.
[64] Matjhabeng Local Municipality, "Updated Status Quo Assessment," 2025.

Context of Service Delivery in Matjhabeng

The context of service delivery in Matjhabeng should be understood within its broader socio-economic and governance environment. Historically reliant on gold mining, the municipality has experienced a significant decrease in revenue due to the sector's downturn, leading to increased unemployment and poverty. This has resulted in lower household incomes, poor revenue collection, and a weakened capacity to maintain infrastructure and provide services.[65] The Auditor-General has regularly expressed concerns about financial management and non-compliance with the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA).[66]

Water Supply Challenges

Water provision remains one of the most urgent service delivery issues in Welkom and the surrounding areas. The municipality has suffered chronic water disruptions due to ageing infrastructure, high water losses, and non-functional treatment facilities. Reports indicate that Matjhabeng loses more than 50% of its water through leakages caused by deteriorated pipelines and poor maintenance practices.[67] Consequently, residents face prolonged water outages, threatening public health and dignity.

National government intervention was necessary after the failure of bulk water and wastewater systems. In 2022, the Department of Water and Sanitation launched a ministerial intervention, allocating approximately R4.2 billion to rehabilitate wastewater treatment works and pump stations across Matjhabeng.[68] Although there has been progress, sustainability remains uncertain due to vandalism, limited technical capacity, and ongoing financial difficulties.

Sanitation and Wastewater Management Challenges

Sanitation failures in Matjhabeng have worsened into a crisis over the years. Sewer spillages are common in Welkom, Thabong, and Odendaalsrus, with raw sewage contaminating streets, rivers, and residential areas. At the height of the crisis, nine out of eleven wastewater treatment plants were out of operation, creating serious environmental and health risks. Poor maintenance, vandalism, and insufficient capital investment have intensified the sanitation crisis. While recent refurbishment initiatives have restored some functionality, issues such as a shortage of skilled personnel and delays in municipal rehabilitation efforts continue to threaten the provision of effective sanitation services.[69]

Electricity Supply and Energy Infrastructure Challenges

Outdated infrastructure, cable theft, and outstanding debts to Eskom hinder electricity service delivery in Matjhabeng. The municipality owes billions of rand to Eskom, resulting in frequent power outages and the risk of bulk supply cuts. Residents in Welkom have faced prolonged blackouts due to cable faults and limited availability of repair equipment, such as cherry pickers. The electricity distribution network requires significant capital investment, estimated at nearly R500 million, to upgrade substations, street lighting, and network management systems.[70] Without addressing financial mismanagement and enhancing revenue collection, electricity services are likely to remain unreliable.

Solid Waste Management and Roads Infrastructure

Solid waste management in Welkom and surrounding townships has deteriorated sharply, especially during labour unrest and strikes by municipal workers. Disruptions have led to illegal dumping, creating environmental and health hazards for communities.[71] Limited fleet capacity and constrained operational budgets further hinder effective waste collection. Similarly, road infrastructure in Matjhabeng suffers from potholes, poor stormwater management, and delayed repairs. These problems impede local

[65] Matjhabeng Local Municipality, "Updated Status Quo Assessment."
[66] Auditor-General South Africa, "Municipal Audit Outcomes," 2023.
[67] High Court of South Africa, "Judgment on Matjhabeng Local Municipality Service Delivery Failures," 2024.
[68] Department of Water and Sanitation, "Water and Sanitation Intervention in Matjhabeng," 2026.
[69] Bizcommunity, "R4.2bn Investment Drives Matjhabeng's Sanitation Revival," 2026.
[70] Parliament of South Africa, *Research Paper on Oversight and Accountability during Local Government Week* (Cape Town: Parliament of South Africa, 2022).
[71] OFM News, "Matjhabeng Protests Leave Residents in Limbo.," 2024.

economic growth, cause more vehicle damage, and lower resident satisfaction. Inadequate planning and under-spending on capital projects have worsened infrastructure decline.[72]

Governance, Financial Management, and Institutional Capacity

At the core of Matjhabeng's service delivery issues are weak governance and financial mismanagement. The municipality has been placed under provincial administration due to its persistent failure to meet service delivery obligations. Court rulings have pointed out serious breaches of constitutional duties, including the failure to provide services sustainably.[73] Revenue collection rates remain below 55%, weakening liquidity and restricting the municipality's ability to pay creditors and maintain infrastructure. Political instability, cadre deployment, and high staff turnover further impair institutional performance and accountability.[74] Service delivery issues in Matjhabeng, especially in Welkom, are multidimensional and deeply rooted in historical, financial, and governance-related factors. While national and provincial efforts have provided temporary relief, lasting progress relies on strong political leadership, effective financial management, skilled personnel, and community involvement. Without tackling these systemic problems, service backlogs will persist, further damaging public trust and hindering socio-economic growth in Matjhabeng.

Human Resource Management and Technical Skills

Human resource management and oversight remain significant weaknesses that continue to hinder service delivery performance in Matjhabeng Local Municipality. The municipality has consistently faced challenges with ineffective workforce planning, skills mismatches, and weak performance management systems, leading to limited accountability and poor operational oversight. Reports by the Auditor-General have repeatedly identified high vacancy rates in critical technical and management roles, instability in senior administration, and non-compliance with performance management regulations, all of which hinder effective supervision of service delivery functions.[75] Inadequate oversight mechanisms further worsen these issues, as poor contract management, weak internal controls, and limited consequence management enable inefficiency and maladministration to persist. This has resulted in poor monitoring of infrastructure projects, overlooking of maintenance schedules and a reactive approach in addressing service failures rather than through preventive, planned interventions.

Closely linked to poor human resource management is the severe shortage of artisan and technical skills needed to maintain and repair ageing municipal infrastructure. Matjhabeng faces a significant deficit of electricians, plumbers, fitters, mechanics, and civil engineering technicians, leading to extended service disruptions when infrastructure fails. Consequently, the municipality increasingly depends on external contractors, often at greater cost and with limited skills transfer, which further undermines institutional capacity.[76] Inadequate planning worsens this skills shortage, as infrastructure asset management plans are either outdated or poorly executed, causing deferred maintenance and recurrent system failures. The absence of integrated planning between technical departments and financial management units has also resulted in underfunded maintenance and a misalignment between capital projects and operational capacity. Without enhancements in artisan training, retention strategies, and integrated infrastructure planning, Matjhabeng will remain caught in a cycle of infrastructure decline and service delivery failures.

Furthermore, in the State of the Nation Address in February 2025, President Ramaphosa outlined the service delivery challenges South Africans face. He highlighted issues such as roads not being maintained, disruptions to the electricity supply, failure to collect refuse, and failure to repair sewage leaks. He acknowledged that municipalities lack the technical skills and resources to address these

[72] Matjhabeng Local Municipality, "Updated Status Quo Assessment."
[73] High Court of South Africa, "Judgment on Matjhabeng Local Municipality Service Delivery Failures."
[74] R Mphanya, T Gumbo, and G O Onatu, "Drivers of Local Government Service Delivery Failure in South Africa: Experiences of Matjhabeng Local Municipality, Freestate Province," in *Development and Investment in Infrastructure in Developing Countries: A 10-Year Reflection* (CRC Press, 2024), 53–60.
[75] Auditor-General South Africa, "Municipal Audit Outcomes"; Matjhabeng Local Municipality, "Updated Status Quo Assessment."
[76] Mphanya, Gumbo, and Onatu, "Drivers of Local Government Service Delivery Failure in South Africa: Experiences of Matjhabeng Local Municipality, Freestate Province."

challenges, and he undertook to revive the white paper on local government to develop an updated system that would better serve the needs of local government.[77] This discussion document is intended to pave the way for a revised local government white paper in 2026. The review pointed out that the main challenges facing local government include financial instability, governance issues, service delivery failures, increasing debt levels, unstable councils, deteriorating infrastructure, and poor maintenance of infrastructure assets.[78]

Statistics South Africa identifies municipalities as having the primary responsibility for delivering essential services such as water, sanitation, electricity, and waste management to communities.[79] Although various pieces of legislation govern municipalities, corruption among municipal officials and politicians leads to challenges in service delivery, hampering these legislative frameworks. Since municipalities struggle to meet their constitutional obligations, the South African government should reexamine the constitutional powers of local government and develop a workable model for managing municipalities.[80]

The IDP should be used effectively to ensure service delivery, promote local economic growth, and foster community involvement in the governance process.[81] Consider the district development model proposed by President Ramaphosa to address service delivery challenges, including job creation, support for local business development, and community involvement.[82] Revising the 1998 white paper on local government can allow for a more effective response by local government to service delivery. The new GNU can also facilitate reform at legislative and institutional levels to address corruption, improve accountability, simplify processes, and attract international investment to increase resources for service delivery. These strategies can enhance the efficiency and sustainability of local government.[83] Additional solutions might include stronger capacity-building programmes for municipal staff, more transparent financial systems, public participation in decision-making, and leveraging technology to monitor service delivery. These measures will lead to greater efficiency among government officials, reduce corruption, and enhance accountability and the management of public funds. Overall, such efforts should restore public trust in local government.[84]

The South African Constitution safeguards fundamental human rights. Regarding rights related to service delivery by local government, one may refer to sections 10 and 24 of the Constitution Act 1996. Section 10 states that everyone has the inherent right to dignity and the right to have this right respected and upheld. The ability to live in a clean and safe environment is connected to one's right to dignity and to Section 24, which affirms the protection of rights related to living in an environment that is not harmful to one's health or well-being, and also aims to safeguard the environment for future generations (*Constitution Act, 1996)*. This indicates that the government must implement legislative and other measures to prevent pollution and ecological degradation, and to promote conservation to ensure sustainability and the responsible use of natural resources. Section 151 of the Constitution establishes municipalities as structures within local government and vests executive and legislative authority in the municipal council. Subject to national and provincial legislation, a municipality is authorised to govern the local affairs of a community. Local government must ensure the sustainable delivery of services to communities while fostering a safe and healthy environment. The municipality should work towards achieving these objectives (*Constitution Act, 1996*). The debate is not about whether the system of local government needs to be reformed; the focus should be on how much, how quickly, and by whom.

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[77] Republic of South Africa Department: Cooperative Governance, "Discussion Document on the Review of the White Paper on Local Government (Discussion Document)," 2025.
[78] Department: Cooperative Governance, "Discussion Document on the Review of the White Paper on Local Government (Discussion Document)."
[79] Stats SA, *Migration Profile Report for South Africa: A Country Profile 2023* (Pretoria: Statistics South Africa, 2024).
[80] John Mamokhere, "Service Delivery Conundrums in South African Municipalities," *Insights into Regional Development* 7, no. 2 (June 30, 2025): 30–42, https://doi.org/10.70132/b5776454636.
[81] Mamokhere, "Service Delivery Conundrums in South African Municipalities."
[82] Mamokhere, "Service Delivery Conundrums in South African Municipalities."
[83] Mamokhere, "Service Delivery Conundrums in South African Municipalities."
[84] Mamokhere, "Service Delivery Conundrums in South African Municipalities."

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several suggestions are made to strengthen local governance and enhance service delivery in Matjhabeng Local Municipality based on the study's findings. To improve accountability and efficiency in service delivery, Matjhabeng Local Municipality should first strengthen its institutional and administrative capacity by hiring suitably qualified employees on merit, funding ongoing staff development, and enhancing performance management systems. The Municipal Council should also strengthen oversight procedures by ensuring that council committees, especially the Municipal Public Accounts Committee (MPAC), effectively monitor executive performance, infrastructure projects, and municipal finances. Resolutions passed by the council shall be observed and carried out within the allotted period.

Another recommendation is that, to help the municipality address ongoing issues with governance, financial management, and service delivery, the Free State Provincial Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) should offer ongoing technical assistance, governance monitoring, and capacity-building initiatives. In compliance with legislative and constitutional provisions, the province should act quickly to intervene as needed. It is prudent to recommend that National Treasury keep bolstering financial oversight by encouraging better municipal financial planning, enforcing adherence to the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA), and helping municipalities create long-term revenue collection plans while ensuring infrastructure grants are efficiently administered and tracked. In addition, the national government should expedite infrastructure maintenance and investment initiatives to repair deteriorating road, water, sanitation, and electricity infrastructure while ensuring infrastructure grants result in quantifiable improvements in service delivery outcomes.

To further encourage participatory government in municipalities in the Free State Province, openness, and public accountability, community stakeholders such as ward committees, civil society organizations, and citizens should actively participate in municipal planning, budgeting, monitoring, and evaluation procedures. In addition to ensuring that local demands are reflected in service delivery priorities, increasing citizen engagement can enhance trust between communities and the municipality.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the local service delivery issues that Matjhabeng Local Municipality in the Free State Province faces and to pinpoint the institutional, governance, financial, and administrative elements that still make it difficult for the municipality to carry out its developmental and constitutional mandate. The results show that the ongoing governance flaws, poor financial management, deteriorating infrastructure, limited institutional capacity, insufficient community involvement, and inadequate accountability mechanisms have hampered the municipality's capacity to provide high-quality, equitable, and sustainable public services. These issues have impeded socioeconomic growth and the implementation of developmental local government as envisioned in the Republic of South Africa's Constitution. Matjhabeng Local Municipality must transition from reactive crisis management to a model of moral leadership, professional administration, sound financial governance, evidence-based planning, efficient maintenance of municipal infrastructure, transparent decision-making, and significant citizen engagement if it hopes to become a truly developmental and service delivery-compliant municipality.

Equally important is strengthening institutional capacity through merit-based appointments, ongoing skill development, effective performance management systems, and stringent accountability for subpar work and inadequate administration. Strong political and administrative commitment to good governance, intergovernmental cooperation, responsible resource management, and steadfast adherence to the constitutional principles of responsiveness, efficiency, accountability, and developmental governance are ultimately necessary for sustainable service delivery. Matjhabeng Local Municipality may reposition itself as a resilient, citizen-centered, and developmental municipality that can provide high-quality services that enhance the well-being and standard of living of its communities by adopting these changes.

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